

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on December 14, 2004,
the following tribute to the life and service of the late Paul Bénichou
was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

PAUL BÉNICHOU

BORN: September 19, 1908

DIED: May 14, 2001

When Paul Bénichou died in Paris in May 2001 at the age of 92, he was known as one of France's most distinguished literary scholars, the author of seminal works on major periods of French literature, venerated by generations of students and professors for whom his books were required reading. Sixty years earlier, however, he had been a young teacher out of a job: the Vichy government's "Jewish decree" of October 1940 had deprived all Jewish civil servants of their livelihood. Bénichou, fired from his post as *professeur* in a Paris *lycée*, was living in Lyon giving private lessons to support his wife and young daughter. Not long after that, things got even worse for Jews in France, and in the spring of 1942 the Bénichous had the good fortune of being able to emigrate to Argentina thanks to an invitation from the University of Mendoza, and later moved to Buenos Aires. In 1949 Paul Bénichou got back his *lycée* job in Paris, but without a doctoral thesis he could not aspire to a university position. He had presented a manuscript in 1946, but a Sorbonne professor judged it to be insufficient for a thesis—the book in question, a study of the 17th-century *moralistes*, *Morales du grand siècle*, published in 1948, has since become a classic, never out of print in more than fifty years.

As you have probably surmised, Harvard became the beneficiary of the Sorbonne's shortsightedness. For more than twenty years, starting in 1958 (when he first came as a visitor), Paul Bénichou was a beloved professor in the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, teaching to packed rooms in Boylston Hall. His seminars on 17th-century theater, especially Molière, were famous not only because of his erudition but because he often read aloud from the plays, performing all the roles, including the female ones, with dramatic flair. To see Bénichou "playing" Agnès in *L'École des femmes* was an unforgettable experience, as some members of this committee can testify. In addition to French, he taught a seminar in Spanish poetry that became the basis for his acclaimed 1968 book, *Creación poética en el romancero tradicional*.

Paul Bénichou was born in the city of Tlemcen in Algeria on September 19, 1908, into a Jewish family that had lived in North Africa since "time immemorial," as he stated in a 1997 interview. His paternal grandfather, a tailor, spoke only Arabic. Algeria had become a French colony in

1830, and for several decades Jews and Arabs had the same status as “natives” in relation to the French colonial administration. In 1871, however, all the Jews of Algeria were granted French citizenship, and by the early twentieth century they had become almost wholly Europeanized in language and cultural identification. At the same time, they maintained ties to a diverse history—Paul Bénichou’s maternal family were descendants of Spanish Jews who had been expelled from Spain in 1492, and still spoke a medieval version of Spanish. Paul grew up hearing songs from the oral tradition of Judeo-Spanish *romances*, and later devoted a learned treatise to that genre; he also learned Arabic in school (having chosen it over English as his “living language”), and acquired a good knowledge of Hebrew which he read to the end of his life. His great passion, however, was French literature (and Latin and Greek, which were obligatory in literary studies at the time). “Books and literature were my bible,” he said years later, proclaiming himself a “disciple of the Age and Philosophy of the Enlightenment.” From adolescence on he thought of himself as a secular humanist, even while recognizing his ties to Judaism as a matter of “inalienable memory.”

In 1924, at the age of 16, Paul Bénichou left Algeria for the rigors of Parisian winters and education. Admitted to the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure two years later, he embarked on a brilliant scholarly career—but those were heady years in France, years of revolutionary fervor in both literature and politics. Paul Bénichou threw himself energetically into both: he read the Surrealists, took part in pacifist demonstrations, signed antimilitarist manifestoes. In 1929, he married the daughter of an eminent Romanian journalist, Gina Labin, and the two became active members of small leftist groups, publishing antifascist and anti-Stalinist essays in now forgotten journals. After the war, Gina Labin-Bénichou became a lawyer and maintained an active practice in Paris for many years; she also published two novels. Meanwhile, Paul Bénichou obtained his *agrégation*, a highly prestigious diploma, and started teaching. In 1935, their daughter Sylvia was born, who would go on to become a distinguished professor of Spanish literature at the Sorbonne. In September 1939, Paul Bénichou was called up to the Army, and saw the French defeat of May 1940.

The Bénichous knew André Breton, Jacques Lacan, Albert Camus, and many other luminaries of the French intellectual world; in Argentina, they met and became lifelong friends of Jorge-Luis Borges, about whose work Paul Bénichou wrote several articles at a time when he was hardly known outside his native country. Bénichou was so modest, however, that he almost never spoke about his colorful past and prestigious connections to his students at Harvard—he was a legend to many of us, but we knew few hard facts about his life. From 1959 to 1979, he taught in Cambridge one semester every year (this privileged half-time position allowed him not to do any administration, he noted happily!)—and the rest of the year he spent in the reading room of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, always seated in the same seat, his books and index cards spread out before him. In his book on the seventeenth century, he had sought to show the connections between social history and literary history, or as he put it “between the writer and his milieu.” Now, Bénichou turned his attention to a later period, devoting his research during his years at Harvard to the ideas and the literature of French Romanticism. In

1973, he published the first of a series of magisterial books on the subject, *Le Sacre de l'écrivain: 1750-1830 (The Consecration of the Writer)*, in which he traced the rise of the writer during and after the Enlightenment as a figure representing secular spiritual values. This book was followed over a fifteen-year period by three others, in which Bénichou tracked the evolution of the figure of the writer from the optimism of the early 19th century (*Le Temps des prophètes*, 1977; *Les Mages romantiques*, 1988) to the disenchantment that characterized the post-1848 years (*L'École du désenchantement*, 1992).

In 1995, at age 87, he published a study of the Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé (*Selon Mallarmé*), in which he situates Mallarmé in the long line of 19th century poets who dreamed of attaining the “real world” through poetic language, as the distinguished French scholar Henri Godard notes in an essay devoted to Paul Bénichou’s work. Godard points out the originality of Bénichou’s approach, which sees Mallarmé as the end point of a Romantic trajectory (ending in the realization that “the Ideal” is unattainable, and that language will never fully represent anything other than itself) instead of considering him only as the initiator of modernist poetry, which is the better known view of Mallarmé.

With these books came the “consecration” of Bénichou’s own work in France. Although he never did teach in a French university, the honors he received in his post-Harvard retirement years must have been very gratifying to him. Ever a modest man, he did not seek glory, but he found it nevertheless: during his lifetime (in 1982 and 1995), two large volumes were published devoted to discussions of his work, with contributions by scholars ranging from the Academician Marc Fumaroli to the semiotician Tzvetan Todorov. In 2003, the International Association of French Studies devoted a whole day to Paul Bénichou’s work during its annual meeting in Paris. Other publications about him and re-editions of his own works are in progress. He is survived by his wife Gina Labin-Bénichou, his daughter Sylvia Roubaud-Bénichou, his granddaughter Laurence Roubaud, and two great-granddaughters.

Respectfully submitted,

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Note: We wish to thank Mme Sylvia Roubaud-Bénichou for providing the rich documentation on which much of this Memorial Minute is based, including Laurence Roubaud’s biographical essay on her grandfather, Henri Godard’s essay on Paul Bénichou’s work, and Sylvia Roubaud-Bénichou’s own memoir and her study of her father’s writings on oral poetry.